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SUBJECT: UNDER SECRETARY HUGHES' ISTANBUL MEETINGS WITH
RELIGIOUS LEADERS

REF: ANKARA 2750

Sensitive but Unclassified -- not for internet distribution.

¶1. (SBU) Summary: During her 24-hour visit to Istanbul, Under Secretary Hughes met with religious leaders representing a range of confessions and exchanged views on how extremism can most effectively be counteracted. All stressed the need to combat the underlying causes of extremism, including poverty and lack of access to education.

In a separate call on Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, Hughes emphasized that religious freedom remains at the center of our dialogue with Turkey, and that we continue to push the Turkish government to address those issues threatening the Patriarchate's future in Istanbul. End Summary.

Interfaith Dialogue

¶1. (SBU) U/S Hughes met September 28 with religious leaders from six different faith communities (Muslim, Armenian Orthodox, Jewish, Greek Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox and Catholic) to discuss the role religious leaders can play in promoting interfaith dialogue and tolerance in the world. In brief opening remarks, the Under Secretary praised Turkey's rich cultural mosaic and pointed to tourists she'd seen side by side from Texas and Bahrain exploring Istanbul's Topkapi Palace as illustrations of the unique opportunity Turkey presents in bringing people together from all parts of the world. She highlighted our government's desire to expand exchange opportunities between the people of the U.S. and Turkey, and asked the faith leaders for their views on other ways to promote tolerance and interfaith understanding.

¶2. (SBU) In their responses, U/S Hughes' interlocutors focused on the need to combat poverty and promote access to education as the only ways to foster peace and understanding.

They argued their efforts to contribute to these goals cannot be fruitful if politicians don't play their part by developing good policies. Reverend Father Dositheos, representing the Ecumenical Patriarchate, accused politicians throughout history of having abused religion to divide people, and Istanbul Mufti Cagrici called on faith leaders to launch "Holy Peace" rather than a holy war. Chief Rabbi Haleva explained that Turks are a very pious people, who are very affected by images they see on television. In trying to understand the minds of those who choose to die by perpetrating terrorist attacks, Armenian Patriarch Mesrob underlined that when there is no hope to live, suicide is easy. Some choose to die to make a point, he said, so that others might live after them. "What can we do to give these people hope?" he asked.

¶3. (SBU) U/S Hughes agreed that combatting poverty is an important policy priority and pointed to the U.S. having tripled its funding to Africa and leading the fight against AIDS as a sign of our common purpose. She also highlighted the meeting she and Deputy U/S Powell held recently with the World Food Program officials to discuss how the U.S. can do more to combat hunger. As a government official and as a person of faith, she said, her job is not just "public relations," but contributing to policies that positively affect people's lives.

¶4. (SBU) In the background of the dialogue was the fact that the religious minorities around the table, while able to worship freely, face significant property and administrative problems in maintaining their communities (reftel). Only the Catholic representative in Istanbul, Monsignor Marovitch, alluded directly to these issues. Comparing Turkey's peoples to the bouquet of flowers covering the table, the Monsignor observed that "there are many flowers in Turkey and should be a place for the small ones as well." He acknowledged that with the EU process change is underway and that the GOT needs time to work things out. Rabbi Haleva said his community's problems had largely been solved by the EU process, and that his community lived comfortably among the "noble and compassionate" Turkish people.

Meeting with the Ecumenical Patriarch

15. (SBU) In a subsequent call on Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew on September 29, Under Secretary Hughes thanked His All Holiness for sending a representative to the interfaith dialogue, and solicited his personal advice for combatting the spread of extremism among the younger generation, particularly in the Muslim world. Conveying the President's best wishes, U/S Hughes also stressed that religious freedom issues remain front and center in our dialogue with the Government of Turkey. Bartholomew expressed appreciation for the U.S. government's longstanding support for the Patriarchate and religious freedom, and promised to pray for the success of the Under Secretary's mission, terming it critical for the world's

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future. He noted that he has worked extensively on interfaith initiatives, and believes the key is to reach out to moderate Muslims and to seek to give the young "ideas and vision for their future."

16. (SBU) Regarding the Patriarchate's future, Bartholomew, who was joined by Father Alex Karloutsos from the Orthodox Church in America, stressed the critical importance of his See, the "first among equals" in the Orthodox world, for the Orthodox church as a whole. Only the Patriarch, he observed, is able to coordinate among the different leaders of Orthodoxy, and he noted that he had convened his peers earlier this year to address the crisis in the Patriarchate of Jerusalem. Bartholomew summarized the range of challenges facing the Ecumenical Patriarchate, including continued closure of Halki Seminary, property issues, and its lack of legal standing under Turkish law. He noted his belief that Turkey's current government is decisively pushing a "moderate path" on these and other issues, as was evidenced by its support for the holding of last weekend's conference on the Armenian tragedy of 1915. He argued, however, that that other statist elements are impeding a solution to the problems confront the Patriarchate. He expressed appreciation for the USG's strong support of the Patriarch's Ecumenical nature and said it "fortifies us and gives us courage." Hughes pledged that the USG will remain dedicated to securing resolution of these issues.

17. (SBU) Comment: Under Secretary Hughes' interfaith dialogue and her call on the Patriarch highlighted efforts by Turkey's diverse communities to find common ground and build mutual tolerance and respect, despite significant tensions as they struggle to preserve their deeply rooted communities. End Comment.

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